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SUBJECT: IRAQIS IN JORDAN: WHO THEY ARE AND WHAT TO EXPECT
IN THE EVENT OF WAR

REF: AMMAN 16

Classified By: Ambassador Edward W. Gnehm. Reasons 1.5 (b,d).

Summary

1. (S) Most political observers in Jordan predict that the great majority of the large Iraqi expat community in the Kingdom (estimated by the GOJ to number approximately 300,000) will stay quiet should military action against Saddam commence, and will then exercise caution before deciding to return to Iraq following regime change. Although difficult to gauge fully, this appears to be the prevailing attitude of most Iraqis here, whether they are part of the large mass of Iraqi economic migrants who have come to Jordan seeking work; artists, musicians and academics contributing to the active Iraqi cultural scene in Jordan; or members of the small, wealthy and well-established business elite (perhaps 2-3 percent of the total) who have prospered here. While the vast majority of Iraqis in Jordan pose no threat to political stability or Hashemite rule, GOJ security forces are actively searching for Iraqi agents who have infiltrated the Kingdom. These agents or operatives might seek to destabilize the country by means of armed actions such as assassinations, ambushes or attacks on U.S., Jordanian or exile Iraqi targets in the Kingdom in the event of U.S.-led military action. End Summary.

The Iraqis Here: Who They Are

2. (C) Gaining a comprehensive picture of the Iraqi population in Jordan is not easy. With the exception of the General Intelligence Directorate (GID), no organization that we are aware of (either official or NGO) looks at the Iraqi expat population as a whole. Iraqi businesspeople deal with Jordanian counterparts on mutually beneficial deals while Iraqi laborers interact with their Jordanian employers; Iraqi artists, writers, musicians and academics are involved with Jordanian individuals, organizations and universities on specific projects or performances; and even UNHCR and the other humanitarian NGOs in Jordan that provide assistance to Iraqis in need see only a small self-selected percentage of the total (reftel). The Iraqi community in Jordan is not a cohesive whole, but rather a series of distinct subgroupings without a unified leadership or structure. Relief agencies that work with Iraqis believe that the GOJ would actively discourage a unified leadership for the Iraqi community and, as a result, have shied away from any activity that would be construed as political organization. Many of the Iraqi business elite in Jordan, for example, have far more interaction with the Jordanian captains of industry than with Iraqi laborers not of their social class.

3. (C) Those constraints notwithstanding, there is a consensus among our Embassy contacts and diplomatic colleagues on the general outline of the Iraqi population here. The vast majority of expat Iraqis in Jordan are economic migrants who have arrived during the past decade as job prospects in Iraq for those not tied to the regime have deteriorated. Many were formerly members of the Iraqi middle class and saw their salaries and purchasing power destroyed in the years following the Gulf War. They often have been willing to accept positions below their qualifications for the simple reason that they can earn more in Jordan doing relatively unskilled labor than they can in Iraq engaged in the work for which they were trained. We hear from refugee relief organizations that most of these economic emigrants -- like the Iraqi population as a whole -- are Shi'a. While working class Iraqis make up the biggest segment of the expat population, smaller numbers in the arts and industry/trade play significant roles in their respective sectors of society. Our Consular Section notes that all of these segments of Iraqi society are represented among the several hundred Iraqi immigrant visa applications that are in process at any one time. In this limited grouping, however, Christians are more heavily represented than in the Iraqi population as a whole.

The Working Class and Below

14. (C) By far the largest segment of Iraqis in Jordan are those who come to work in the industrial sector. A common snapshot of such a worker would be a man in his mid-20s to mid-30s, previously an engineer but now working as a custodian in an industrial factory in Amman, Zarqa, Irbid, or (to a lesser extent) Aqaba. He is probably paid less than Jordan's minimum wage of USD 112/month and may live with 5-10 compatriots in a small apartment close to the industrial zone where he works. Although he may complain to his compatriots of mistreatment from his employer, he does not report this to the Ministry of Labor lest he risk deportation for being out of legal status.

15. (C) Politically, the average Iraqi worker in Jordan appears to have little sympathy for Saddam, and has a more sophisticated view of the scope of Saddam's misrule than his Jordanian counterparts would. He may harbor anger at Saddam for destroying his job prospects at home as well as resentment toward Jordanians whom he sees as exploiting his vulnerabilities (paying him too little and charging him too much for rent or other necessities). That said, he is, for the most part, apolitical, less concerned about the plight of Palestinians in Jordan, and more focused on earning a living than regime change.

16. (C) Below the class of Iraqis engaged as unskilled or semi-skilled labor in the industrial estates are untold numbers who scrounge out uncertain subsistence incomes as day laborers, street-corner peddlers and beggars. No statistics on this population are available and the limited information we have is based on our own observations and those of NGOs (such as Caritas) (reftel) that assist Iraqis who seek out their services.

Artists, Musicians and Academics

17. (C) In addition to the large number of Iraqi laborers in Jordan there is a smaller, but still significant, population of Iraqi artists, musicians and academics -- some of whom can be categorized as middle income. Many in this group also complain that they are inadequately paid, underappreciated, and subject to discrimination due to their temporary residence status. That said, these Iraqis have had a tremendous impact on the Jordanian cultural scene and have established in Jordan what many art critics acknowledge is something of an Iraqi "cultural renaissance."

18. (SBU) Art centers, such as Darat al Fanun have employed Iraqi artists to conduct training workshops for Jordanian artists. More than 20 art centers have opened in Amman alone in recent years, with most of the credit going to these Iraqi artists. Jordan's music and theater scene has also prospered from the influx of Iraqis in recent years. The National Music Conservatory instructors are 80 percent Iraqi, and Iraqi musicians comprise at least half of Jordan's National Symphony Orchestra. The Noor al Hussein Foundation Theater is the home of many young Iraqi actors. Additionally, Jordan's academic institutions are staffed with many Iraqis, especially in the arts. Jordan University's new Faculty of the Arts largely depends on part-time Iraqi instructors for its program. In the past, Yarmouk University's Music Department, the only such university-level department in the country, has drawn more than 80 percent of its professors from among the Iraqi expat community. However, in the mid-1990s a large number of Iraqi artists, musicians and graphic artists emigrated to Canada and Europe, and at Yarmouk University only one of five Ph.D. holders is now Iraqi. That said, many Iraqi commercial artists remain and a considerable number of private schools still use Iraqi teachers to support their music and drama programs.

19. (C) Such work opportunities notwithstanding, most Iraqi artists in Jordan are not happy with their status quo, and their economic situation -- while better than if they were in Iraq -- is still precarious. Few Iraqi artists engage in overtly political work -- both because such themes do not sell as well and out of fear that to do so could cause problems for their relatives still in Iraq. If asked, many express strong interest to follow in the footsteps of those who have already emigrated either to Europe or North America, places where they believe their talents would be more fully appreciated.

The Business Elite

110. (C) Far removed from the hardships of those Iraqis eking out a living at the lower levels of Jordan's economic food chain is a relatively small group of wealthy and well-established Iraqi industrialists and traders who have lived and worked in Jordan for decades and who dominate some local industries, notably prepared foods. Like their poorer

countrymen, this business elite is, for the most part, apolitical. They have built successful, diverse interests in Jordan and the region and have little interest in taking a forward-leaning political stand on one side or the other of the Iraq question. As Iraqis -- and as sound businessmen -- they would have an interest in investing down the road in a post-Saddam Iraq. However, any decision to do so would be based on hard-nosed commercial realities, notably their perception of the stability of any new political order in Iraq. This small group is unlikely to move their operations back to Iraq post-Saddam but would rather seek to expand their current operations into that market once it is clear that the political risk factors are manageable.

Saddam's Agents:
Relatively Few, but Capable of Causing Trouble

11. (S) While the vast majority of Iraqis in Jordan will almost certainly remain quiet in the event of military action against Saddam, there is an expectation (both in official Jordanian circles and among the public at large) that an unknown number of Iraqi agents are already here, have mixed into the broader community, and will seek to sow instability in the Kingdom, possibly before hostilities begin. Armed actions may include assassinations/ambushes of Jordanian, U.S. and Iraqi opposition targets as well as attacks on other facilities in Jordan. How many Iraqi agents are already present is difficult to quantify, but assuming that they number only in the low hundreds (i.e. a fraction of one percent of the total Iraqi community here), the potential for trouble is not insignificant. Former Iraqi Oil Minister Issam Chalabi (a long time Iraqi exile in Amman who is currently an oil industry consultant) told poloff recently that he believes Iraqi agents will seek to carry out acts of violence in Jordan, including against anti-regime Iraqis. Because of that fear, he and his family intend to depart Amman for London if military action begins and remain there until the regional situation stabilizes.

12. (S) Jordanian security forces are well aware of this potential and are aggressively seeking to root out those elements from the population. Actions implemented have included increased scrutiny at the border (refusing entry to military age males, for example), security sweeps in neighborhoods where Iraqis live, and other activities. The GOJ is under no illusion that these efforts will be 100 percent effective but are doing all they can to minimize the potential for destabilization.

Comment

13. (C) If/when military action against Saddam begins, Jordan will confront myriad security, political and economic challenges -- the gravity of which will depend on many unpredictable factors (a contemporaneous spike in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a prolonged cutoff of oil supplies, the duration and character of the war, etc.). In all probability, however, the behavior of the bulk of the large Iraqi expat community in the Kingdom should constitute one of the government's lesser concerns. More problems can be expected to originate in the Palestinian refugee camps and poorer East Bank towns than in neighborhoods with large numbers of Iraqis. Most Iraqis here will lie low and hope that their loved ones in Iraq escape any conflict unharmed. The GOJ, nevertheless, will keep a close eye on them, seeking to differentiate the small number of agents provocateurs from the larger peaceful population.

14. (C) How quickly many Iraqis will seek to return to a post-Saddam Iraq is open to speculation. For most, Jordan has offered them a tolerable but not prosperous existence. If the security situation after Saddam is stable and jobs tied to the country's reconstruction are plentiful, many -- especially among the professional and working class -- can be expected to return to reunite with their families. If the situation is less clear, and the reports from back home less glowing, the number of those choosing to return will, inevitably, be much more modest. Whatever the scenario, given all that most Iraqis have been through in their lives, they will likely show considerable caution in making key decisions for themselves and their families.

GNEHM